Chapter 18
FENGMING'S EXECUTION WENT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH.
HUP!
GRIP
WHAT A WASTE.
IF ONLY I'D SAVED SOME OF THE ALCOHOL JINSHI GAVE ME...
...I COULD'VE ENJOYED A MOONLIT NIGHTCAP.
OH? SOME-ONE ELSE ALREADY BEAT ME TO IT?
WHAT A PRETTY MOON.

HSWSH
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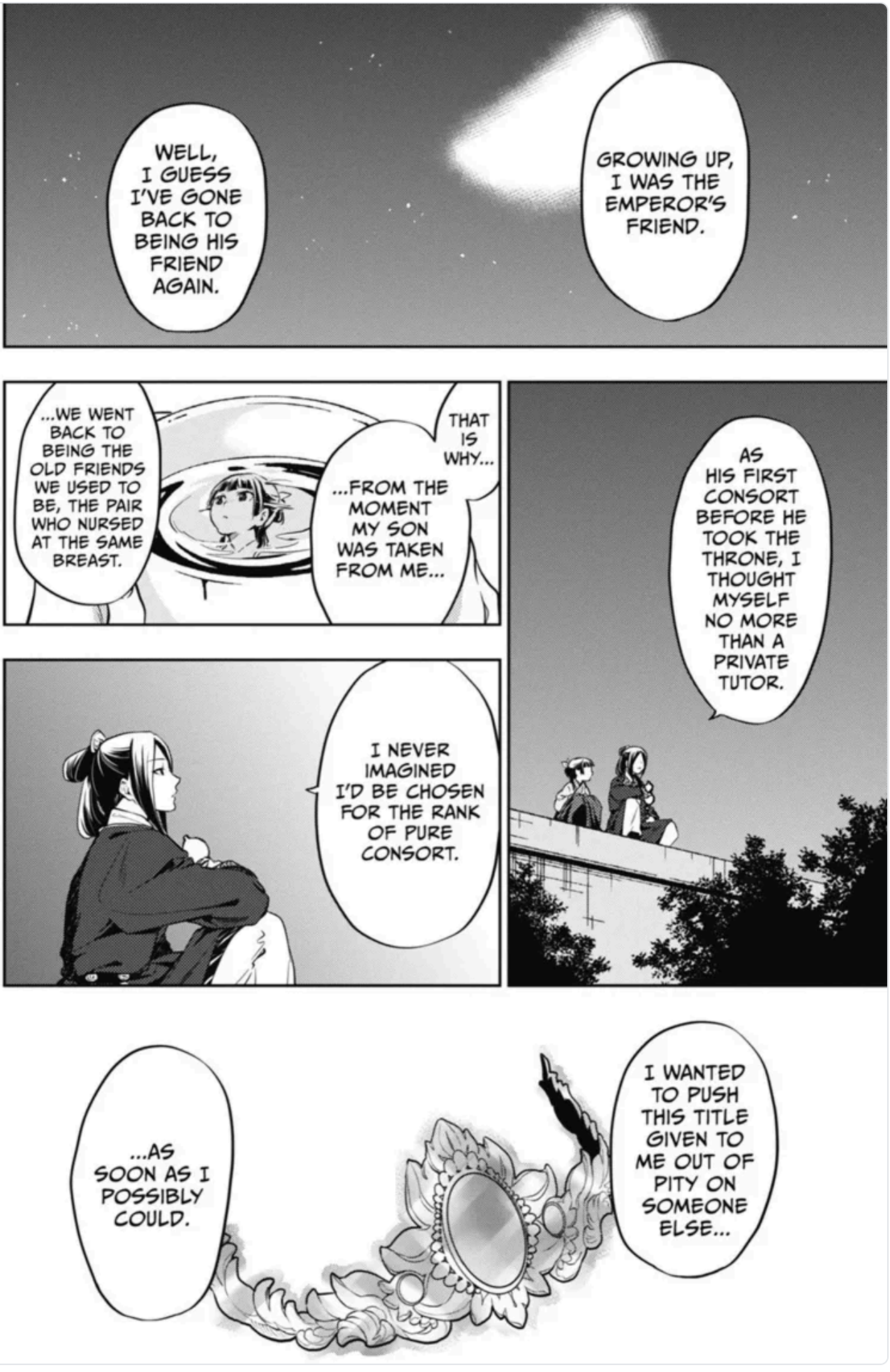
WELL, IF IT ISN'T THE LADY-IN-WAITING WHO CAME TO HELP OUT BEFORE!

I CAN LEAVE YOU TO IT, MY LADY.
THAT'S ALL RIGHT. NO NEED.
CARE TO JOIN ME FOR A DRINK?
I WASN'T LURED IN BY THE BOOZE, OKAY?
I SWEAR IT.
GLUG
ぐびっ
I CAN'T HELP THINK-ING...
...THAT SHE REMINDS ME OF SOMEONE I KNOW.
ちらっ
GLANCE

DO YOU THINK ME MANNISH?
WITH THAT SORT OF BEHAVIOR, DEFINITELY.
HA HA! THAT SO?
YOU'RE AN HONEST ONE.
CONSORT ADUO WILL BE LEAVING THE INNER COURT ON THE MORROW.

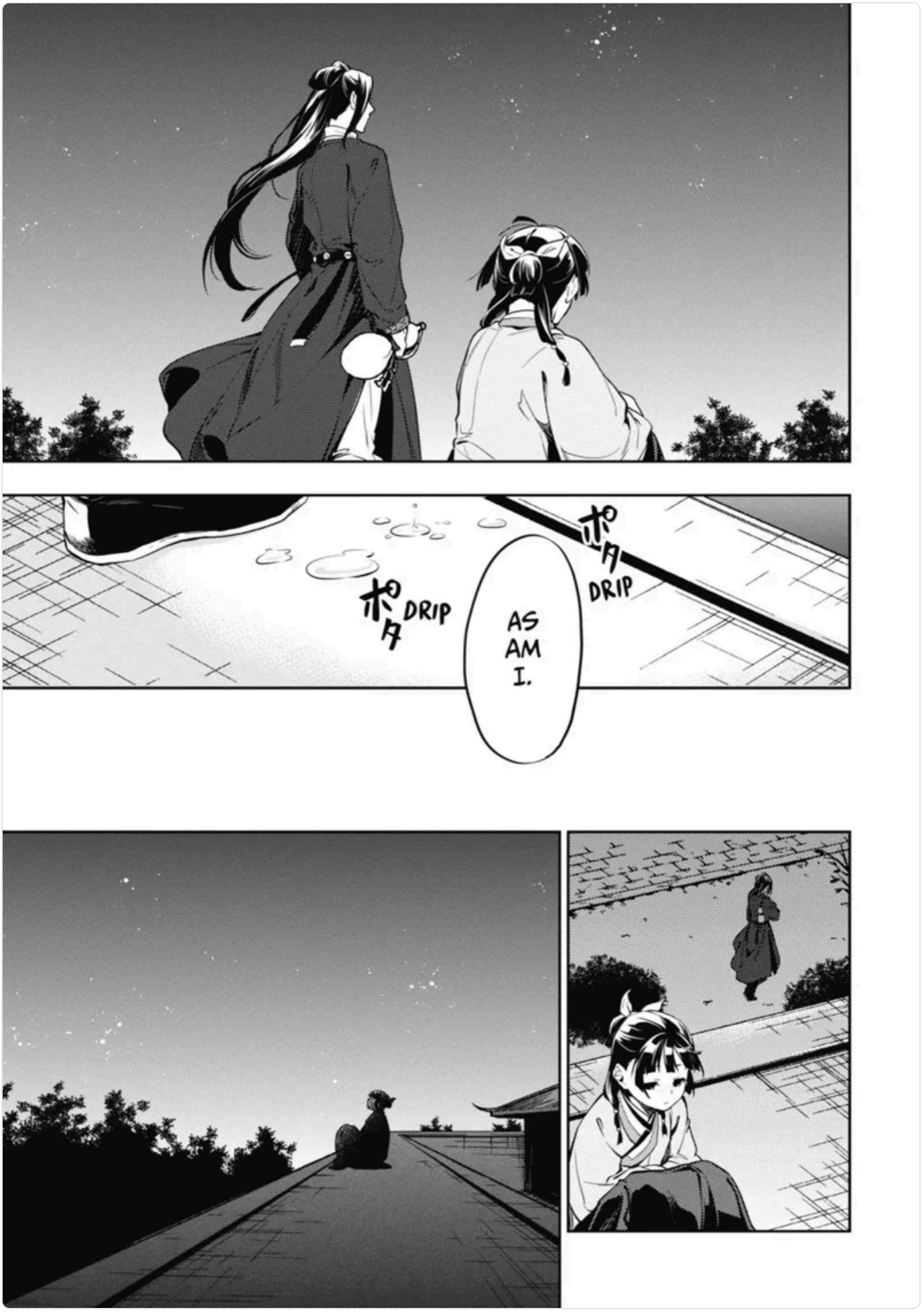
Chapter 18 Consort Aduo


WELL, I GUESS I'VE GONE BACK TO BEING HIS FRIEND AGAIN.
GROWING UP, I WAS THE EMPEROR'S FRIEND.
...WE WENT BACK TO BEING THE OLD FRIENDS WE USED TO BE, THE PAIR WHO NURSED AT THE SAME BREAST.
THAT IS WHY...
...FROM THE MOMENT MY SON WAS TAKEN FROM ME...
AS HIS FIRST CONSORT BEFORE HE TOOK THE THRONE, I THOUGHT MYSELF NO MORE THAN A PRIVATE TUTOR.
I NEVER IMAGINED I'D BE CHOSEN FOR THE RANK OF PURE CONSORT.
...AS SOON AS I POSSIBLY COULD.
I WANTED TO PUSH THIS TITLE GIVEN TO ME OUT OF PITY ON SOMEONE ELSE...

...DO I CLING TO IT SO?
BUT WHY...
すSST?
...IT WILL BE NONE OF HER CONCERN ONCE SHE'S LEFT THE INNER COURT BEHIND.
WHATEVER RUMORS ABOUT HER RUN RAMPANT IN THESE HALLS IN FUTURE...
...WHO WILL BE ONE NO LONGER, COME TOMOR-ROW.
THESE ARE THE CONTEM-PLATIONS OF A CON-SORT...
I'M SURE SHE WOULD'VE SPOKEN OF THESE THINGS NO MATTER WHO WAS UP HERE WITH HER.

THE WATER MUST'VE BEEN SO VERY COLD.
SHE MUST'VE BEEN CHILLED TO THE BONE AND IN SUCH PAIN.
YES, SHE MUST HAVE.

SHE WAS A FOOL.
...MM, PERHAPS.
EVERYONE IS SO FOOLISH.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DRIP
AS AM I.
ポタ
DRIP

AND CONSORT ADUO HAD REALIZED AS MUCH.
...THE KITCHEN MAID REALLY DID KILL HERSELF.
SO THAT MUST MEAN ...
JUST AS FENGMING WILLINGLY WENT TO THE GALLOWS...
DESPITE THAT, THE MAID...
MAYBE FENGMING HAD AIDED THE GIRL IN HER ATTEMPT.
...MUST'VE PLUNGED INTO THE ICY WATERS OF HER OWN VOLITION...
...SO THAT SUSPICION WOULD NOT FALL ON CONSORT ADUO.
...WHETHER OR NOT CONSORT ADUO HERSELF WISHED IT SO.
...THERE WERE THOSE WHO HAD GIVEN THEIR LIVES FOR HER...

WHAT ARE YOU DOING THERE?!
!!
WHOOSH
...GUESS I SHOULD CLIMB DOWN SOON TOO.
WAGYAH!
FWUMP
WHO THE HECK GOES AROUND SHOUTING AT PEOPLE OUT OF THE BLUE LIKE THAT?
UGH...
NNGH...

WELL, EXCUUUSE ME!
EEP!!
SIR JINSHI! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!
I THINK I SHOULD BE ASKING YOU THAT.
.....
FORGIVE ME. I'LL M—
—OVE!
YANK

UM, SIR JINSHI?
COULD YOU PLEASE LET ME GO?
IT'S TOO COLD OUT HERE... I DON'T WANNA.
WHAT ARE YOU, A KID?
SQUEEZE
HAVE YOU BEEN DRINKING?
NUZZLE
YOU HAD TO DRINK WITH SOMEONE IN THE INNER COURT ...?
I WAS INVITED. I HAD TO JOIN.
NUZZLE
YOU MAY BE A EUNUCH...
...BUT ISN'T THE EMPEROR GIVING YOU A LITTLE TOO MUCH FREE REIN IF YOU'RE RUNNING AMUCK HERE, DRUNK OFF YOUR BACKSIDE?
STARE

SIIIIR JINSHII!
WHAT THE HECK IS GAO SHUN DOING RIGHT NOW?
PLEASE GO BACK TO YOUR CHAMBERS.
YOU'RE NOT EVEN WEARING A JACKET. YOU'RE GOING TO CATCH A COLD.
...THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE ...
'N' THEN WHEN HE GOT BACK...
...HE KICKED ME RIGHT OUT, SAYIN' HOW HE FELT MUCH BETTER, SO'S I OUGHTA GO HOME...
...HE LEFT TO GO WHO-KNOWS-WHERE.
HE INVITED ME FOR DRINKS, 'N' THEN AFTER MAKING ME DRINK TO HIS HEART'S CONTENT...
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THERE'S SOMEONE AT THE INNER COURT WITH THE POWER TO TREAT JINSHI LIKE THAT?
I DON'T HAVE TO INDULGE SOME CLINGY DRUNK.
もぞ SNUGGLE
もぞ SNUGGLE
NO, WAIT. THAT'S NEITHER HERE NOR THERE.
...WITHOUT EVEN A WORD OF THANKS FOR CATCHING ME.
IT MIGHT BE RUDE TO CHASE HIM OFF...
HMM...
HE DID BREAK MY FALL JUST NOW.
OH, BUT HOLD ON.
GASP
SIR JINSHI ...
UM...

SQUEEZE

WARM ME UP JUST A LITTLE LONGER.
JUST A BIT MORE.

SIGH

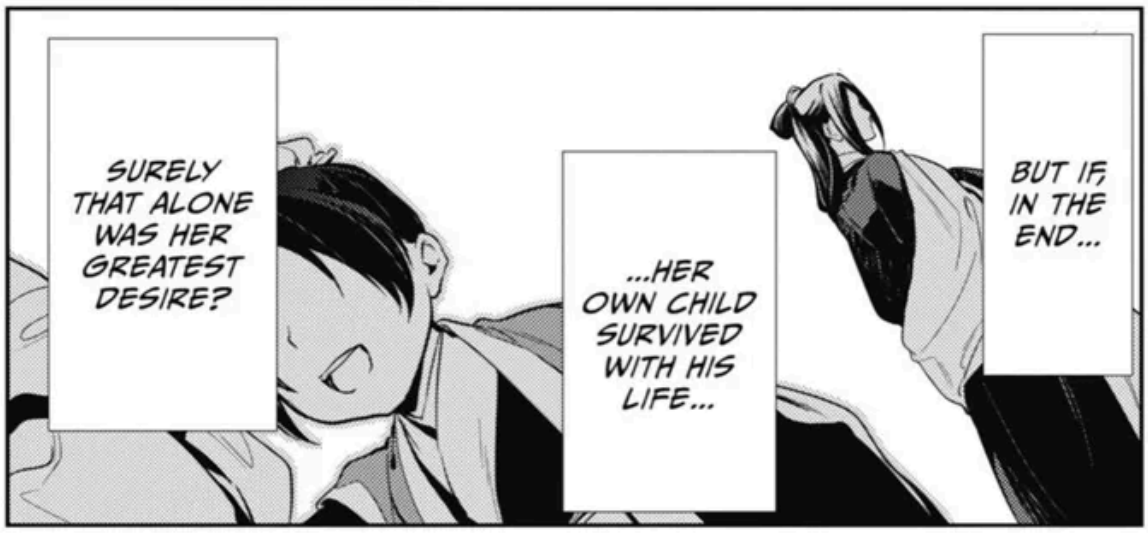
THE CROWN THAT IS THE EMBLEM OF THE RANK OF THE PURE CONSORT...
...WILL SOON BE PASSED TO THE GIRL WHO WILL BE JOINING THE EMPEROR'S HAREM.
THE MAJESTIC CONSORT ADUO CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS LOOKING ACCOM-PLISHED.
SHE LOOKS NOT AT ALL LIKE A POOR WOMAN BEING DRIVEN OUT OF THE INNER COURT.
LADY ADUOO!
I GUESS I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT EITHER OF THEM BEING HUNG-OVER.

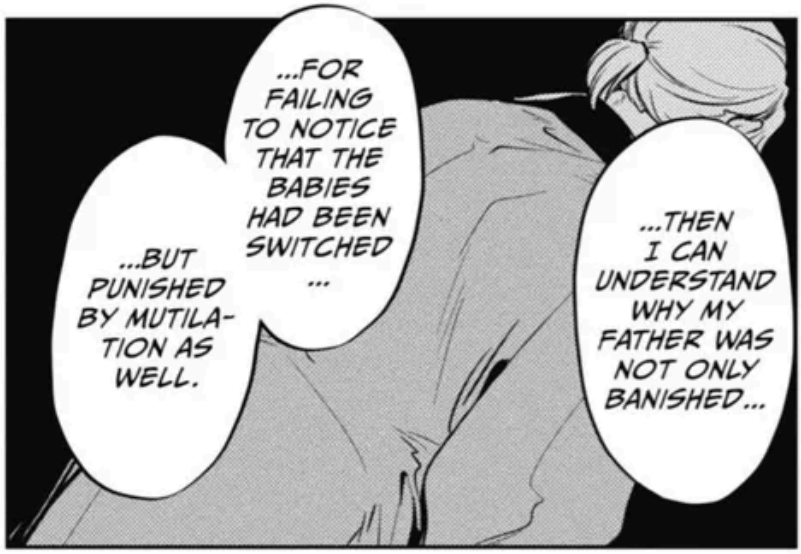
A EUNUCH WHO LOOKS LIKE A HEAVENLY MAIDEN...
...AND A CONSORT WHO RESEMBLES A GALLANT YOUNG MAN.
THEY'D LOOK MUCH BETTER IF THEY SWAPPED OUTFITS, THOUGH.
I THINK THAT'S WHO SHE REMINDED ME OF LAST NIGHT.
IT MUST'VE BEEN JINSHI.
...FROM THE MOMENT MY SON WAS TAKEN FROM ME...

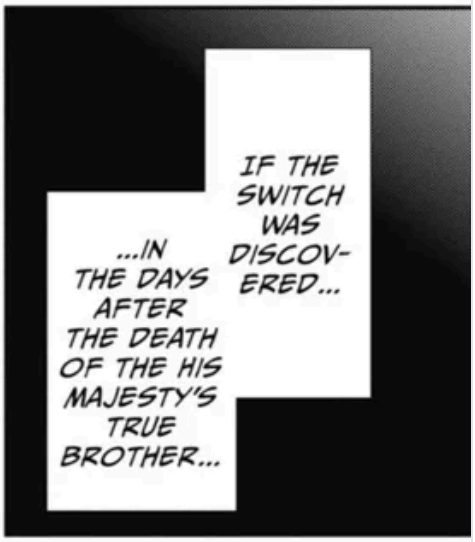
HER PHRASING ALMOST MAKES IT SOUND AS IF HE'S STILL ALIVE.
WHAT IF THE EMPEROR'S YOUNGER BROTHER AND CONSORT ADUO'S SON...
...WHO WERE BORN AT ALMOST THE SAME TIME, WERE SOMEHOW SWITCHED?

"THE MOMENT HE WAS TAKEN" ...?
NOT "THE MOMENT HE DIED" ...?

CONSORT ADUO, UNABLE TO BEAR HER CHILD BECAUSE THE EMPRESS WAS GIVING BIRTH AT THE SAME TIME...
...MUST HAVE FELT KEENLY WHICH OF THE TWO BOYS...
...WOULD BE RAISED WITH GREATER CARE.
AFTER ALL, WHO WAS SHE BUT THE DAUGHTER OF A WET-NURSE?
A CHILD BORN TO THE EMPRESS ...
...WOULD BE TREASURED FAR MORE AND PROTECTED WITH GREATER DILIGENCE THAN HER OWN.
PERHAPS WHEN SHE WAS ON THE ROUGH ROAD TO RECOVERY AFTER THE BIRTH...
... CONSORT ADUO SIMPLY COULDN'T ...
...TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG.


SURELY THAT ALONE WAS HER GREATEST DESIRE?
...HER OWN CHILD SURVIVED WITH HIS LIFE...
BUT IF, IN THE END...


...BUT PUNISHED BY MUTILATION AS WELL.
...FOR FAILING TO NOTICE THAT THE BABIES HAD BEEN SWITCHED ...
...THEN I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY MY FATHER WAS NOT ONLY BANISHED...


...IN THE DAYS AFTER THE DEATH OF THE HIS MAJESTY'S TRUE BROTHER...
IF THE SWITCH WAS DISCOVERED...

WHY LADY ADUO WAS ALLOWED TO REMAIN AT THE INNER COURT AS THE PURE CONSORT...
THE EMPEROR'S "BROTHER" CURRENTLY BEING IN A LESSER POSITION...
IF THIS IS TRUE, THEN IT ALL MAKES SENSE.

EVEN THE REASON SHE CAN STAND SO TALL DESPITE HAVING ALLEGEDLY FAILED TO FULFILL HER DUTY AS CONSORT...
HEH.
YEAH, RIGHT.
THERE'S NO WAY.
THAT'S PROBABLY THE WILDEST IDEA I'VE EVER COME UP WITH.
PLEASE WAIT!

M—
MY LADY! PLEASE WAIT!
AND THERE THEY GO AGAIN.
UGH...
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BUT AT LEAST NOW...
...YOU HAVE NO CHANCE OF SURVIVING IN THIS GARDEN OF WOMEN.
IF YOU CAN'T MANAGE YOUR OWN HOUSE-HOLD...
THAT IN ITSELF IS AN IMPROVE-MENT.
...SHE'S NOT ALONE.
LADY ADUO!
SNAG
Ah
AHH!

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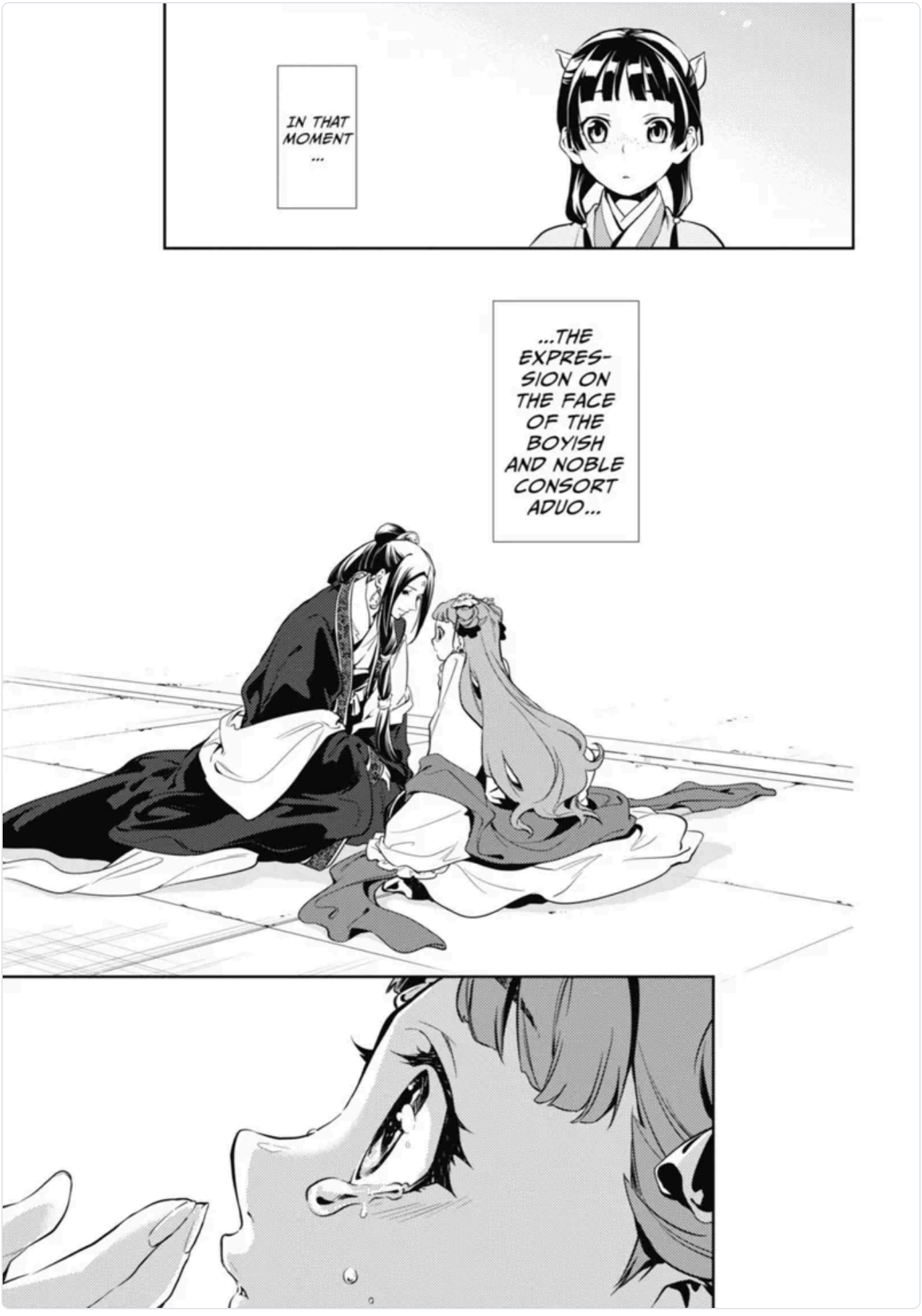
IN THAT MOMENT ...
...THE EXPRES-SION ON THE FACE OF THE BOYISH AND NOBLE CONSORT ADUO...

...WAS VERY MUCH THAT OF A MOTHER'S.